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SUBJECT: VIETNAM CELEBRATES - AND EDITS - INAUGURATION OF PRESIDENT OBAMA

Summary

1.(SBU) The enthusiastic audience response of Hanoi's American Center Inauguration event was mirrored in the extensive and congratulatory coverage from most major Vietnamese media outlets, including posting of the official translation of the President's inaugural address on numerous web portals. Vietnamese censors made two edits, to remove a reference to the battle of Khe San and the word "communism" in a reference to the challenges of previous generations. Interestingly though, an entire sentence condemning "...those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent," was faithfully translated and included in the GVN-approved version of the speech. End summary.

Hanoi Celebrates President Obama's Inauguration ...

2.(U) Over 100 Vietnamese students, academics, officials and members of the media joined Embassy staff and members of the international community to mark President Obama's historic inauguration. Held at the American Center on Wednesday, January 21, PAS staff showed CNN coverage of the event, timing the presentation so that it mirrored Tuesday's activities in Washington and culminated in the Oath of Office taking place at (just after) noon in Hanoi. CNN's program, though on a usual 30-minute delay, ran in full without interruption or editing the night before.

13. (U) Ambassador Michalak opened the event with brief remarks, noting the unique predictability of America's elections and presidential transition period. He then held a quiz of inaugural trivia, where once again Vietnamese students astounded the Americans present with their extensive knowledge of U.S. history and society. As the inauguration unfolded, the audience frequently burst into applause - at the President - Elect's appearance, after his swearing in, and after his moving inaugural address. In this Communist authoritarian nation, the response of the Vietnamese participants in our inaugural event was warm and extremely enthusiastic. This very positive reaction has carried through in media coverage of the Embassy's event and congratulatory messages to President Obama and the new government from all major Vietnamese media outlets.

... And Posts Most of His Inaugural Address

14. (U) Identical copies of the official translation of the President's inaugural address have also been posted on numerous web portals, including VietnamNet, the country's major online news outlet (www.vnn.vn). The official version is not quite complete, however, since censors made two edits. First, the reference to Khe Sahn was cut out of the list of battles and replaced with a set of ellipses [...]. Second, the word "communism" was exorcized from the paragraph on previous generations facing down fascism and communism and likewise replaced by ellipses. Interestingly, the entire sentence "To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist." was faithfully translated and included in the GVN-approved version of the speech.

Comment

15. (SBU) The enthusiasm with which the American Center audience and the general public has received the new administration is evident in personal and official reactions, including extensive media coverage.

The exorcizing of two sensitive words from the President's inaugural address highlights the ongoing neuralgia with which any negative reference to Vietnamese themes, including its political system, is received by authorities here. However, the use of ellipses in the inaugural transcript is a small nod to intellectual honesty previously unseen in the Vietnamese media.

MICHALAK